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## Women walk home

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### Full Text:

In brief, uncertain light and early morning cool the women I converged, stepping out of the alleys and shadows cast by stone buildings, huddling in small groups at the meeting-place. The disused mosque, which caught the first full light, was pocked with shrapnel scars.

The only man in the bus was the driver. The women hugged their fears and their excitement to themselves, but some of it escaped into the air inside the bus, so that we breathed a blend of longing, trepidation, promise.

Sea at times, and arid fields, light traffic on the early road. All over Cyprus, women were converging on the pick-up points, busloads of them drawn towards the capital, until the square inside that city thronged with buses, more than eighty, filled with women, young and old, old-young, young-old.

Ice-cream vendors sold stale, poisonously bright ice cream in tiny cones from glass containers like rectangular fishtanks, balanced on the handlebars of bicycles. Women walked restlessly up and down the narrow footpath opposite a section of the city wall, greeting each other, exchanging scraps of information about their lives since 1974. Men stood around in separate groups, fingering their beads, waiting.

There was a sudden ripple of purposeful movement. Passengers began to return to their buses, but there were so many that it was difficult to find the right one. A young woman appeared at the front of our bus and proceeded to issue instructions. [K[lambda][epsilon]][sigma][epsilon] [tau]O [sigma][tau]O[micro][alpha]' was the only phrase I fully understood. It meant, don't say anything, keep your mouth shut. She handed a small olive branch and a white flag to Koula, an elderly woman near the front of the bus, and jumped down.

After the briefings, the clumsy cavalcade swung out of the dusty square. Every bus was crammed to capacity, with women sitting or standing in the aisles and occupying spaces near the drivers.

Men lined the city streets, applauding. They were unaccustomed to seeing women off to the front, they felt foolish, all they could do was acknowledge the women's courage. Men were not permitted to take part in this journey. Three and a half thousand unarmed women believed they could accomplish more, without casting a word or a stone, than any number of men, armed or otherwise, to draw the world's attention to the fact that Cyprus and its fate continued to be virtually ignored. They wanted the Turkish government, whose troops had occupied northern Cyprus for fifteen years, to account for the disappearance of more than, sixteen hundred Greek Cypriots, including many civilians, who had last been seen alive in Turkish custody. They wanted to make their point without violence or bloodshed. The only males involved in the operation were the drivers. Perhaps there were no female bus-drivers in Cyprus.

The buses wound in and out of alleys in labyrinthine fashion. Only one person on each bus, apart from the driver, knew the destination. Although the papers had been full of news of the planned event for days, and women had converged not just from distant parts of Cyprus, but also from New York, London and Australia, and although the Greek and Cypriot press had predicted violent clashes, where the women intended to cross the Green Line that partitioned Cyprus was still a secret. The organisers were maintaining tight security, so as to give the army of occupation as little prior notice as possible of their precise movements and intentions. So the convoy took a tortuous, circuitous route to confront the minotaur. A poor analogy in fact, since there was no Theseus, but several thousand Ariadnes, and the minotaur was not one creature, but an army of more than thirty-five thousand.

Children ran out of alleys, passing plastic bottles filled with water up to the buses, families cheered from balconies, an old woman in black, her long white braids falling beside her face, stood in her open gateway with both hands outstretched, waving, while tears fell in streams across her cheeks. A girl on our bus called out to her: "We're going for you!" and some girls who looked like high school students began to sing. Koula offered me a dry koulouri (bread-ring) flecked with sesame seed, and bent forward to stroke my hair. I

was sitting near her feet. We had got acquainted on the bus to Nikosia. I guessed she had been touched in some way by the war. She had bullet or shrapnel scars on her bare calves, she limped slightly, she had never married.

Once clear of the city, the sense of disorientation persisted. I would not have known where we were anyway, but everyone else on the bus seemed unclear about this too. For over an hour the convoy twisted and turned in the hot sun, writhing its way between fields and through villages, until a whisper went around, becoming audible. "Limbia?" "Limbia."

Abruptly the buses stopped, women scrambled out and surged toward a steep hill crested by a white Greek church, a red flag with a white crescent flying from it like a gibe.

A few soldiers ran out of the church and stood silhouetted on the crest of the hill. Women surged toward them with remarkable rapidity, then suddenly the wave backed up and toppled over on itself.

A line of police, Greek Cypriot, were pushing back the women, but although the dark blue uniforms resisted and closed ranks, some women broke through, and scrambled up towards the group of soldiers on the hilltop.

A very large Turkish military helicopter commenced harassment, flying very low above our heads. Another line of soldiers appeared between the police and the hilltop garrison, this time United Nations troops. They formed a cordon and tried to push the women back, but scores of them had reached the hill's parapet, where the small knot of soldiers was engaged in physically forcing them down.

Those of us part of the way up the hill could see people streaming across the fields with banners. They were Cypriots and recent Turkish settlers from the village across the line from Limbia. They must have prepared the banners for this contingency. They also carried sticks and scythes and stones. Many of the villagers were women, and the slogans were hostile.

The villagers cut around behind the hill on Turkish occupied land. The women from the convoy still outnumbered all the males present, and skirmishes were breaking out all over the hill, as Greek Cypriot police, UN troops, and Turkish soldiers tried to force them back.

I could feel my entrails twisting in a knot of fear. How would this day end? I was in a line of women who had been pushed back by police, while the helicopter swooped over our heads. I did not try again to scale the hill, but waited with a lot of other women on a strip of no-man's-land on the lower slopes.

The villagers with banners appeared on the crest and spread out their slogans, red on a white ground. They started to shout, "Down with Greeks!" "Viva Denktash!" and words to that effect, and brandished their sticks and scythes. They wanted blood. A line of Turkish riot police appeared on the hilltop, and interposed themselves between the villagers and the women who were still struggling to ascend the hill. The villagers began to skirmish with their own riot police. They wanted to settle the matter themselves.

Turkish press representatives also appeared all over the hill. A soldier from the UN peacekeeping force was recording the proceedings with a video camera, when he was set upon by Turkish villagers and pressmen. Pieces of his camera flew out in all directions. He was rescued before the same was done to him.

Some Greek Cypriot women near me were approached by Turkish Cypriot men, who had come across the fields to the foot of the hill, and did not carry slogans. I could understand part of what was being said. I overheard a Turkish Cypriot man say to a Greek Cypriot woman in black: "We don't want conflict, we don't want Denktash. I am a Cypriot, I want my children to live in peace with your children." "I had five children," the woman said. "I buried all of them." "Other women called to her, "Don't speak to him, don't speak to him."

For hours under a parching postmeridian sun, a bloodless battle raged across the hill. Women continued to assail three lines of men, but made no further headway, and those who had reached the top within minutes of our arrival were gradually forced bodily down the hill.

Only in the bus driving back through the dusk to Nikosia did I learn that similar scenes had been enacted at the village of Akhna, where half the convoy had been directed. There, women had occupied the desecrated church of Aghia Marina and held a requiem. The difference was that at Limbia all the women had been evacuated, some with injuries, whereas at Akhna fifty-nine women had been captured by Turkish troops, and their whereabouts was not yet known. There was no singing on the return journey. Back at the square some left the bus but others continued on, across Cyprus to the town where we'd set out that morning. Koula promised to visit me next day.

When I arrived back at my room at Pension Phidias, I found the note I had left on the bed for my landlady, in case I should fail to return. I also found that my jeans and underwear were drenched with blood. I had started bleeding two weeks early, inexplicably, a singular occurrence in my life.

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